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ABSTRACT

In 1984, parents of a Minneapolis, Minnesota, ninth grader came before the school district's "Students' Right to Learn Committee" to object to what they described as a bowdlerized version of "Romeo and Juliet" in the Scott, Foresman text, and the publisher's failure to acknowledge in the text that the play was abridged. The committee concurred with the parents' conclusion. In spite of the parents' preference for having the book removed and returned to the publisher, the committee recommended specific steps the district should take, including expressing censorship concerns to the publisher, requesting statements from all publishers justifying any abridgments, and reminding teachers to inform students that "Romeo and Juliet" is abridged and to have a complete version available if a student should want it. Scott, Foresman is not the only publisher to abridge texts, although it is the only one to acknowledge it--in the teacher's manuals. Some publishers provide extensive abridgements and surprising reasons for them; others offer praise for the committee's concerns. From this experience, the committee has learned (1) a great deal about the publishing business and the powerful influence of states on textbook adoption policies; (2) that a wider range of literary selections is either being excluded from texts altogether or being more extensively "edited" than was suspected; (3) that school districts must look more critically at texts, and not rely on the information provided by publishers; (4) that the district's process for selecting texts is inadequate, due in part to the open text selection policy; (5) that publishers do respond to constructive criticism and negative publicity; and (6) that teachers must unite to express concerns if problems such as these are to be solved. (Two annotated bibliographies concerning the issues and complexities in textbook writing and textbook adopting, and specific problems in the development and selection of literature anthologies are included.) (HTH)

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Romeo and Juliet in the Minneapolis Public Schools: Accurate Text or Bowdlerized Text?

Margaret A. Reed

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Romeo and Juliet in the Minneapolis Public Schools: Accurate Text or Bowdlerized Text?

(Note: This paper was the third of three given under the heading "Textbooks--Bowdlerized,Deleted, Emended?" The session was cosponsored by NCTE's Standing Committee against Censorship)

The experience we have had with textbook censorship in the Minneapolis Public Schools contrasts with that we have heard about in Tennessee and Texas. Minnesota is what publishers call an "open" state--we do not have a statewide textbook adoption. In addition, the Minneapolis Public Schools does not adopt a literature anthology series, letting each junior and senior high school faculty select its own texts. The district's Language Arts Department does have a philosophy and rationale for the teaching of literature, and we have a set of objectives for teaching literature at each grade. We use these statements to help us select literature anthologies to place on our district's Selected List of Learning Materials, which we update and publish each year.

Our school district follows the practices recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English concerning the students' right to learn. Citizens who have objections to learning materials are encouraged first to take up their concerns with the teacher or librarian and the principal in the local school. If the conflict cannot be resolved there, citizens are encouraged to complete a "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work" form and to appear before the district's Students' Right to Learn Committee to explain their objections.

In the early spring of 1984, the parents of a ninth grader in one of our high schools came before this committee to object to what they described as a bowdlerized version of Romeo and Juliet in the Scott, Foresman text Arrangement in Literature, the book being used in their son's classroom. They further objected to the publisher's failure to acknowledge in the text that this bowdlerization had occurred. In support of their argument, they prepared a xeroxed copy

of pages from an unabridged version of the play, circling passages that Scott, Foresman had deleted from the text. After hearing their arguments and examining the material they presented, the committee concurred with their conclusion. The committee recommended specific steps the district should take, steps which the Director of Curriculum agreed we should follow.

The steps were, first, that the chairperson of the Students' Right to Learn Committee meet with a school district attorney to explore the legal issues of the complaint; second, that the Director of Curriculum send a letter to Scott, Foresman summarizing committee concerns about censorship of Romeo and Juliet; third, that the Curriculum Director write to all publishers expressing concern about censorship and requesting a statement from each publisher explaining what abridgments had been made in any new literature anthologies sent to us for review; fourth, that the Language Arts Consultant inform all English and reading teachers of the censorship and abridgment contained in the Scott, Foresman text; and, fifth, that the consultant remind teachers of their responsibility to inform students that the version of Romeo and Juliet in that text is abridged, and have available an unedited text for student use.

The parents who had brought the complaint to the committee were not satisfied with this response. They wanted the textbooks dropped from use in classrooms and urged us to return them to the publisher, requesting reimbursement or exchange. We could not agree to this request because we had been responsible for the book's being put on the list in the first place. We have, however, taken the other steps which I listed earlier.

It is important to mention that Scott, Foresman's abridgment of the play is not unique. After we received the citizens' complaint about Arrangement in Literature, we checked the ninth grade text in all the major publishers' series, since that is the text in which publishers place Romeo and Juliet. All publishers who had anthologized the play made cuts similar to those we found in

Scott, Foresman's book. In fact, Scott Foresman was the only publisher to acknowledge having made any abridgments. They did so in the teacher's guide that accompanied the text.

We have found that this failure to acknowledge abridgments was a preview of the kind of responses we were to receive to our request for information about new literature texts sent to us for reviewal. Our request to publishers had asked for a listing of selections that had been abridged and an explanation of the nature of the abridgment. We have discovered that the lists we receive are not complete and not always accurate. We have also been surprised by the extent of abridgments made in many texts and by the reasons given for such changes.

Some publishers send us general statements of their abridgment policies; all but one have sent us lists of abridged selections--usually with general explanations that do not tell us what we had requested. Often publishers tell us why they have abridged, citing such reasons as concern for a "manageable time frame," a desire to "make readability more accessible," a need to "delete provocative references," and their wish to respond to "the requests of teachers and department heads." We have also been told, especially in reference to changes in Romeo and Juliet, that the publisher is using the "standard abridgment." Or we are reminded that directors of the play often cut it for production purposes.

Publishers also praise us, stating that they wish there were more people like us, but pointing out that the majority do not feel this way. Sometimes we have discovered that editors of a series are not aware of the abridgments that have been made, due to the lines of responsibility within a particular publishing company and the decisions made by "higher ups." We have also been reminded of the economics of the publishing business, which makes it impossible for pub-

lishers to tailor texts to individual school district's needs, and we have been urged to consider what we lose by not purchasing a text because of the omission of "unessential" lines, etc.

What has our experience taught us?

First, we have a better understanding of the publishing business and of the powerful influence states with textbook adoptions, especially Texas, have on publishers.

Second, we have learned that a wider range of literary selections is either being excluded from texts altogether or being more extensively "edited" than we had ever suspected. Here are some examples, based on information publishers have sent us. A sentence about coyotes in a Pecos Bill story was dropped because the coyotes, which the story described as having been adopted by Pecos Bill, were shown as having been elected to Congress--a reference the publisher considered insulting to Congress. Another publisher described changes made in the sex of characters in a short story: some male characters were changed to females and some females to males to eliminate sexist stereotypes of women and girls. Another change involved eliminating what the publisher called expletives from--among other selections listed--Call of the Wild, The Diary of Anne Frank, and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." And, of course, another very common change is the dropping of sexual references from Shakespeare's plays. These are just a few examples, selected to suggest the wide range we have been told about.

Third, we have learned that as a school district we must look more critically at texts, not relying on information publishers provide. We have been advised by a school district attorney to have our selection committees compare the publishers' versions against a recognized authoritative version--a daunting task that would require devoting far more time to the selection procedure than we have given in the past.

Fourth, we can see that our entire process for selecting texts falls far

short of what it should be, a situation that results in part from our practice of not adopting a text district-wide, and thus looking too quickly at many, many books. We have not done enough to use our philosophy and objectives to develop specific criteria for text selection. We know now that we have a particular need for criteria that address the range of literature we want to see included in an anthology, that describe abridgments we consider acceptable and unacceptable, and that specify the kinds of discussion and questioning activities, as well as other written and oral language activities, that we want to see accompanying the literary selections.

Developing such criteria would benefit us in a number of ways. We know we will not find the perfect textbook, but such criteria would show us what we need to supplement in a text, would help us define the role texts can and cannot play in the curriculum, and would help us eliminate some books from consideration. Criteria such as these would also give us a sound basis for making clear, specific recommendations to publishers about changes we want to see in future editions, and would enable us to explain clearly our reasons for not including a book on our learning materials list.

This latter point, the need for communication with publishers, leads me to something else we have learned--that publishers do respond to constructive criticism and to negative publicity. Newspaper accounts of our Romeo and Juliet case were picked up by wire services and discussed in other parts of the country. We know that, as a result, Scott, Foresman has had to answer many questions and has made some changes in their ninth grade text. We have also observed that some publishers are trying to respond to the NCTE resolution about censorship by publishers passed at last year's annual business meeting. That resolution urged publishers to avoid abridgment in literature anthologies, but--if they must do so--to state in the textbook and supporting materials that changes have been made. Their responses so far have been modest, but they are a beginning.

For example, in looking at books sent to us this fall, we have found that abridgment in Romeo and Juliet is acknowledged in the teacher's edition of one text--though not in the text itself--an acknowledgment which that publisher had not made in earlier editions. We have also discovered that another publisher has restored lines from Act II, Scene iii of Macbeth, which the publisher had previously excised.

Which brings me to one of the most important learnings of all--that our voices are not heard unless we join together to express concerns. Publishers may not agree to leave the plays of Shakespeare unabridged, but they are beginning to acknowledge what they are doing. I believe that major reasons for this change are the publicity about their practices and the urgings of organizations like NCTE. We realize that not all schools and teachers will agree with the specific changes we in Minneapolis would like to see in literature anthologies, but we have found that there is widespread agreement with our conviction that publishers should make clear what abridgments they have made and do so in both texts and supporting material. Teachers, schools, school districts, states, and professional organizations can and should continue to insist on this candor.

NCTE Panel Presentation (Censorship by Publishers)--November 23, 1985

TEXTBOOK SELECTION/CENSORSHIP

Bibliography

Part I

The following list of books and articles is helpful in understanding some of the general issues and complexities in textbook writing and textbook adopting.

Bernstein, Harriet T. "The New Politics of Textbook Adoption." Phi Delta Kappan 66 (March 1985): 463-466.

Discusses diverse groups seeking to influence text development. Focuses on instructional designers (who want attention paid to text organization, to quality and level of questioning, quality of literary selections, etc.); "mandarins" (who want literature presented in its original form, depth, a "core curriculum"); "megatrenders" (particularly interested in science and math texts). Concludes that the diverse pressures and claims of these special interest groups are probably desirable--and certainly inevitable.

Currence, Cindy. "New California Standards Pose Dilemmas for Text Publishers." Education Week 4 (November 7, 1984): 6, 18.

Discusses the potential conflict between groups wanting to influence content of literature anthologies, as well as other dilemmas. Includes advocates of classical literature, those who promote "social" content, and book protesters who look for the usual controversial topics.

Doyle, Denis P. "The 'Unsacred' Texts: Market Forces That Work Too Well." American Educator 8 (Summer 1984): 8-13.

Asserts that uncertainty about what we want our children to learn is a major reason for poor textbooks. Advocates cooperation by states as a means to improvement. Traces history of criticism of texts. Discusses difficulties involved with text writing and adoption. Argues for closer ties between publishers and disciplinary traditions and between academic disciplines of the university and the course of study in the secondary school.

Farr, Roger and Michael A. Tulley. "Do Adoption Committees Perpetuate Mediocre Textbooks?" Phi Delta Kappan 66 (March 1985): 467-469.

Describes varied, complex process of text adoption. Addresses problems of using criteria sheets. Lists factors that most influence reviewers. Offers recommendations for improvement: distinguishing between selecting a text and selecting a curriculum; shortening and focusing criteria lists; reviewing examples of the criteria; trying out and revising procedures before conducting the actual review; providing adequate time for committee members; making adoption at local district level.

Kirst, Michael W. "Choosing Textbooks: Reflections of a School Board President." American Educator 8 (Summer 1984): 18-23.

Recounts his learning process as a member of the California State Board of Education from 1975-1981 and his swings from favoring open adoption to its opposite and his current uncertainty about the best procedure.

Komoski, P. Kenneth. "Instructional Materials Will Not Improve Until We Change the System." Educational Leadership 42 (April 1985): 31-37.

Discusses three general problem areas (that most texts are filled with "meta-content"; are not tested with learners to verify their ability to communicate in a clear, engaging manner; and lack overall integrity of instructional purpose, content, learning activities, etc.). Recommends six steps to improve materials, including giving teachers time and training to become more discriminating selectors. Emphasizes "instructional integrity and focus" and how to achieve it.

Maxwell, John. "The Future of Textbooks--Can They Help Individualize Education?" NASSP Bulletin 69 (May 1985): 68-74.

Dicsusses textbooks as a dominant element in classrooms. Describes their value in providing some assurances of continuity of experience, of nominal quality in educational approaches, of cross-district scope and sequence, and of compensation for the irregular preparation of teachers. Asserts that improving them requires addressing complex problems which make specifying solutions difficult. Lists frequently heard assertions about textbook inadequacy, but anticipates these changes: badly written texts will go; "coverage" must go; texts, the curriculum and standardized tests should be brought into greater correspondence; major revisions of text selection process must and will be made; better research on the effects and effectiveness of textbooks is likely; change will be slow--which is just as well.

Muther, Connie. "What Every Textbook Evaluator Should Know." Educational Leadership 42 (April 1985): 4-8.

Argues for first analyzing what a text is to accomplish and how it will do it, and then selecting text that best accomplishes that goal. Includes background on publishing to show factors that influence text content. Discusses complexities and compromises involved. One in a series of Educational Leadership articles addressing aspects of textbook selection. (The first article appeared in the November, 1984, issue).

Schuster, Edgar H. "Textbooks: There Has Never Been a Golden Age." Education Week 4 (March 6, 1985): 40.

Writes specifically in response to criticisms of literature anthologies. Emphasizes the lack of historical perspective of some critics and their oversimplified notions of the realities of textbook making. Claims current anthologies are written at a higher level of sophistication than in earlier years and that censorship is broader and wider than we acknowledge (being anything that results in suppression of an author's work). Argues that editing without notice is reprehensible and that reform in this area is long overdue.

Part II

This listing includes works dealing with specific problems in the development and selection of literature anthologies. Also included are helpful sources for related issues facing language arts teachers: handling censorship, writing rationales, communicating with the public, etc.

Burress, Lee and Edward B. Jenkinson. The Students' Right to Know. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

Includes nine short articles on various censorship issues; especially helpful suggestions for productive exchanges between parents, teachers, and administrators.

Bogert, Edna. "Censorship and 'The Lottery.'" English Journal 74 (January 1985): 45-47.

Discusses the story's emphasis on reconsidering traditions. Places the story, written in 1948, in the context of Hitler's Germany. Helpful for preparing teacher rationales for using this story. Note: The January, 1985 issue of English Journal contains many other good articles about censorship, some of which are included in this bibliography.

Bradford, Kenneth. "Report to the Virginia Board of Education on Changes in Words Contained in Secondary Literature Textbooks." Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom 34 (May 1985): 67, 93-95.

Includes definitions of overlapping terms, including abridgement, adaptation, alteration, censorship, expurgation. Discusses background of censorship, pressures on publishers, lines of responsibility in publishing. Describes Virginia's 1984 adoption process, a good model for consideration by other states and districts. Acknowledges the diversity of public schools and the implications of this diversity in textbook selection.

Davis, James E. (ed.). Dealing with Censorship. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.

Articles about the current censorship climate, issues and pressures that influence the teaching of English language arts, and what to do about censorship. Valuable for every English department and teacher.

Particularly valuable is Diane Shugert's chapter, "How to Write a Rationale in Defense of a Book," (pp. 187-191). Three good chapters with specific, practical suggestions for dealing with the public are those by Suhor, Berkley, and Glatthorn.

Donelson, Ken. "A Brief Bibliography on Censorship." English Journal 74 (January 1985): 34-37.

Begins with five "basic" sources and includes books and articles which Donelson considers the best or most provocative materials for teachers and librarians.

Jenkinson, Edward B. "Protecting Holden Caulfield and His Friends from the Censors." English Journal 74 (January 1985): 26-33.

Includes list of 25 targets of the Gablers that most affect English teachers; ideas for refuting the secular humanism charge; list of ten steps every teacher should take.

Karolides, Nicholas J. and Lee Burress (eds.). Celebrating Censored Books. Racine, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, 1985.

Includes rationales for 30 books most frequently challenged in American schools between 1965 and 1982. Includes 15 titles not discussed in Connecticut English Journal's "Rationales for Commonly Challenged Taught Books."

Last, Ellen Louise. Textbook Selection or Censorship: An Analysis of the Complaints Filed in Relation to Three Major Literature Series Proposed for Adoption in Texas in 1978 (dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Texas, 1984).

Examines the Texas textbook adoption process, linquistic and rhetorical features of arguments used by protesters, their definitions of literature and education, and the response of publishers to these objections.

Logan, Maureen F. "Star-Crossed Platonic Lovers, or Bowdler Redux." English Journal 74 (January 1985): 53-55.

Describes the nature of the editing of Romeo and Juliet in Harcourt Brace's 1980 Adventures in Reading. Discusses the effects of this "cleaning up" of the play: diminuition of the character and theme development, loss of key images, destruction of the play's central paradox.

Shugert, Diane P. (ed.). "Rationales for Commonly Challenged Taught Books." Connecticut English Journal 15 (Fall 1983): entire issue.

Includes rationales for 25 books and articles about writing and using rationales, using best sellers, defending adolescent literature, selecting texts. Latter article describes procedures, resources, and benefits of developing a formal selection procedure.

The Students' Right to Read. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1962.

Sixteen-page, updated NCTE position statement on censorship designed to complement The Students' Right to Know. Includes an open letter to parents and the community at large and a two-step program of action for schools. Outlines procedures for book selection and for establishing community support.

Weathersby, Dorothy Thompson. Censorship of Literature Textbooks in Tennessee: A Study of the Commission, Publishers, Teachers, and Texts (dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Tennessee, 1975).

Discusses hesitancy of publishers to reveal their policies and her findings that publishers have silently omitted or altered words and passages. Analyzes materials publishers feel parents and educators will accept for high school students.

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"Books Our Children Read" (28-minute videotape). Available for sale or rental through Films Incorporated (800-323-4222, or collect: 312-256-3200), and for rental through the Ohio Humanities Council (614-231-6879).

Explores how one community (Fort Frye High School, Beverly, Ohio) has dealt with the question of what books children should be allowed to read. Shows a constructive, non-confrontational approach to the conflict over books children read; explores the concerns and feelings of parents in relation to adolescent literature; considers the value of literature in the curriculum; demonstrates the broad educational value of on-going parent-school communication.

Additional information about this "Books Our Children Read" project is given in June Berkley's chapter "Teach the Parents Well: An Anti-Censorship Experiment in Adult Education," pp. 180-186, in Dealing with Censorship.

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